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DOI:10.17951/lsmll.2025.49.3.81-90

## Two Mums and One Dad: Family Portrait in Pepa San Martín's *Rara*

### ABSTRACT

Pepa San Martín's 2016 feature-length film debut *Rara* [Weird] is based on the true story of the Chilean Judge Karen Atala, who in 2004 lost custody of her daughters because of her sexual orientation. Rather than centring its plot on the legal matters of the case, San Martín's account concentrates on the worldview of one of the daughters, Sara, a 12-year-old girl who becomes tacitly aware of being different to the "norm" because of living with her mother and her partner. This study focuses on the questioning of the normative family that the film poses and examines the condition of "weirdness" experienced by Sara. Taking into account previous productions on lesbian motherhood and some fact-based Chilean cinematic narratives, this study argues how *Rara* responds to reformulations of the family unit on both sides of the screen.

### KEYWORDS

*Rara*; Pepa San Martín; family; custody; lesbian motherhood

*Two women sleeping  
together have more than their sleep to defend.*  
Adrienne Rich, "The images"

### 1. Fighting the law

In 2004, Judge Karen Atala Riffo (1963) sued the Chilean State before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights for discrimination after the Supreme Court of her country denied her custody of her three daughters. Atala, the first Chilean judge to publicly acknowledge her homosexuality, divorced her husband in 2002 and, months later, her female partner began living in her house along with Atala's three daughters. In early 2003, her ex-husband filed for custody, claiming that the mother's homosexuality was detrimental to the children. After years of waiting, in 2012, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights concluded that the Chilean

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courts had violated Atala's rights by removing custody of her daughters due to her sexual orientation<sup>1</sup>.

The *Karen Atala and Daughters v Chile* case greatly impacted public opinion within Chile. This opened a national and international debate around the recognition of the rights of queer people, sexual orientation in relation to the exercise of human rights, and the oppressive heteronormativity that prevails in judicial sentences concerning the traditional, nuclear, heterosexual family unit. As Beltrán y Puga (2011) states, the Atala case is part of the cultural debate of heteronormativity vs. contemporary diversity, since it questions whether the only legitimate family model that the legal system, and the Chilean one in particular, should recognize is that of the straight family (p. 224).

The case also had a social impact in a variety of contexts. Judith Butler's *Amicus Curiae*<sup>2</sup> presented for the case in 2011 gives a good account of the way the parental rights of a lesbian mother were violated. In her submission, Butler (2012) dismantles the axis that guides the sentence – Atala's sexual orientation as an argument to question her fitness as a mother – and concludes that discrimination based on sexual orientation “es un modo de regular o de negarle a alguien la posibilidad de vivir abierta y honestamente con su deseo y modo de amar. Este tipo de deseo no puede ser ni legislado ni proscrito – es parte de la diversidad y de la compleja gama humana de sexualidad y amor” [is a way of regulating or denying someone the possibility of living openly and honestly with their desire and way of loving. This type of desire can be neither legislated nor outlawed – it is part of the diversity and complex human range of sexuality and love] (p. 179)<sup>3</sup>.

The case also caught the attention of Chilean filmmaker Pepa San Martín (1974), who remembers following Atala's legalistic battle in the media; a case, in her own words, that was quite emblematic in Chile and the press covered a lot (2016). Born in Curicó, San Martín began her film career as an assistant director on projects by Chilean *auteurs* such as José Luis Torres Leiva and Alejandro Fernández Almendras. In her first work as a director, the short film *La ducha* [The Shower] (2010), San Martín makes use of an 8-minute long take shot with a handheld camera to tell the end of a love story between two women who face the custody of their cat. Filmed practically inside a bathroom and with two actresses naked from the waist up, the intimacy of the sequence and the spontaneous dialogue anticipate the stark realism that will shape her directorial career. In her next short film, women will once again occupy the centre of the narrative. Released in 2012,

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, see *Atala Riffo and Daughters v. Chile*: [https://www.law.cornell.edu/gender-justice/resource/atala\\_riffo\\_and\\_daughters\\_v\\_chile](https://www.law.cornell.edu/gender-justice/resource/atala_riffo_and_daughters_v_chile)

<sup>2</sup> Legal term referencing a “qualified person who is not a party to the action but gives information to the court on a question of law” (Gifis, 2024, p. 28).

<sup>3</sup> All English translations are by the author, unless otherwise specified.

*Gleisdreieck* was shot in Germany, where San Martín obtained an award grant at the Berlinale, and narrates a relationship between three mature women who happen to share their love for cherries. Her next project and feature-length film debut would be marked by a similar concern with lesbian-themed narratives. Co-written by Chilean director Alicia Scherson, *Rara* [Weird] is based on the story of Karen Atala, but rather than centring its plot on the legal matters of the case, San Martín's proposal concentrates on the worldview of one of the daughters, Sara, a 12-year-old girl who perceives the difference in living with her mother and her lesbian partner.

In "Batallas perdidas. Realismo, capitalismo e infancia en el cine latinoamericano contemporáneo", Urrutia Neno et al. (2023) identify a trend in Latin American cinema of the new millennium characterised by narratives featuring child protagonists that do not approach real-life cases in a literal way; on the contrary, these narratives present the true events in an ambiguous, indeterminate manner (p. 79). As seen in other Chilean films inspired by real events that have received significant media attention<sup>4</sup>, San Martín's *Rara* takes the event as

punto de partida para luego elaborar una mirada posible sobre él, organizar un tejido en el que las fisuras, los puntos sueltos –que tienden a deshilar la trama noticiosa (organizada por la prensa y por la opinión pública) – quedan en un primer plano latente, dotado de múltiples significantes. Es decir, se da cuenta centrifugamente de un evento (no se explicita, en muchos casos, el "basado en hechos reales") y sin embargo estamos frente a una ficción que interpreta, a partir de múltiples puntos de contacto, ese acontecimiento [a starting point and then develops a possible perspective on it, constructing a narrative fabric where fractures and loose threads – which tend to unravel the news story (as organised by the press and public opinion) – remain a latent foreground, endowed with multiple signifiers. In other words, an event is portrayed centrifugally (the "based on real events" is often not made explicit), and yet we are faced with a fiction that interprets that event through multiple points of contact.] (p. 80)

## 2. Film as a weapon

In a country that still has a long way to go in terms of gender equality<sup>5</sup>, San Martín's film stands as a plea for LGBTQ rights. As a lesbian feminist and active advocate for social justice and equality, the Chilean filmmaker has stated that,

<sup>4</sup> The authors' selection of Chilean films includes Alejandro Torres' thriller *El Tila: Fragmentos de un psicópata* (Inside the Mind of a Psychopath, 2015), fact-based on a serial rapist and murderer, and *Blanquita* (2022), Fernando Guzzoni's film based on the 2003 child prostitution scandal known as the Spiniak Case, among other various examples.

<sup>5</sup> As Popescu (2023) observes, "while Chile's momentous passing of the same-sex marriage bill into law on 7 December 2021 marks a momentous milestone for an incredibly Roman Catholic and patriarchal country, it is important to continue acknowledging the future work that needs to be done to truly ensure equity and equality for all members of the LGBTQIA+ community in both private and public spheres" (p. 34).

focusing primarily on the gaze of a teenager, she sought to interpellate all types of audiences, especially the unconvinced ones (San Martín, 2020).

Even though *Rara* is a fictional account of a real-life case that obtained prominence in the Chilean press and shook the legal system, the situation it presents is not exclusive to the country. As Urrutia Neno (2020) notes, Chilean cinematic narratives like *Rara*, together with Pablo Larraín's fierce attack on the sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests *El club* [The Club] (2015) or Fernando Guzzoni's *Jesús* (2016), based on a true crime perpetrated by four Chilean men who brutally killed a 25-year-old gay man, "appeal to a global imaginary as much as to a local one. Indeed, this tension between the local and the global is what has made these films successful in different film festivals around the world" (Urrutia Neno, 2020, pp. 143–144)<sup>6</sup>.

San Martín, who lived her childhood and early adolescence under Pinochet's dictatorship, believes that "film is a valuable weapon for social transformation" (Zinegoak, 2020, p. 8), a way to channel through art what the state refuses to change. *Rara* carries out this message through a solid family portrait of two women and two daughters living in joyful harmony until the weight of heteropatriarchy is imposed, represented in this case by the complaint made by the biological mother's ex-husband.

The subject of lesbian motherhood has gained the attention of the visual media during the last two decades, thus becoming part of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century narrative. Television series like the American family drama *The Fosters* (Bradley Bredeweg & Peter Paige, 2013–2018) or *Moments in Love*, the third season of comedy-drama *Master of None* (Ansari et al., 2021), have made lesbian mothering representation accessible to broader audiences. In terms of feature films, queer director Lisa Cholodenko's *The Kids Are All Right* (2010) "stands out as the first mainstream film to shine a light on lesbian parenting" (Heffernan & Wilgus, 2021, p. 6). However, Cholodenko's domestic drama, queer as it may be, has been criticised for focusing its narrative on the dilemma of the lesbian couple's children once they decide to know the identity of their mothers' sperm donor, as well as for promoting white normativity<sup>7</sup>.

In the particular case of Chilean cinema, the appearance of lesbian subjects as main characters had already been explored in a diverse corpus of films by women directors, including Constanza Fernández's *Mapa para conversar* [A Map to Talk] (2012) or Marialy Rivas' *Joven y Alocada* [Young and Wild] (2012). Like San Martín, these female filmmakers demonstrate in their narratives "how political and social bodies are normatively organised around sexuality by the state, the

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<sup>6</sup> *Rara* won the Jury Prize at the Berlin Film Festival in 2016 and received an Horizontes Latinos Award at the 64<sup>th</sup> edition of the San Sebastian Film Festival.

<sup>7</sup> For more discussion of the film, see, for example, Kennedy (2014, pp. 118–132).

church, and the school system” (Blanco, 2022, p. 87). *Rara* depicts a lesbian couple raising two daughters while pondering the way heteropatriarchal prejudices and stereotypes about sexual identity operate in law enforcement and provoke negative reactions in everyday life. The film, however, avoids the melodrama focused on a children’s custody dispute; it is not in the courtroom, but in the domestic sphere, which alternates between the normative space of the paternal house and the all-female home built by her mother and her partner, where most of the film is set. *Rara*, thus, lingers on queer family life and how it is slowly, but irrefutably, separated into pieces.

### 3. Drawing two mums

Set in Viña del Mar, *Rara* opens with a long take of Sara (Julia Lübbert) walking through the school corridor in an over-the-shoulder follow-shot much in the cinematic style of Gus Van Sant’s *Elephant* (2003). The shallow focus underlines Sara’s abstraction, that of a teenager lost in her own world, while the rest of the boys and girls she passes by through the courtyard are involved in different activities. As she goes up the stairs to the gym, the camera remains at a low height to capture her body from the waist down. Even though she’s wearing the school uniform, she is presented as an unusual teenager. Sara then approaches a group of friends who ask her to stay. “I have to go” [Me tengo que ir], she says, and the scene is abruptly interrupted to announce the film’s title superimposed on a black screen: four lowercase letters that stand for the four women that integrate the non-normative family while an unruly animated “r” is inverted as a sign of nonconformity (Huerta, 2020, p. 17). The film’s intentional dissidence is similarly present in the poster design, a shot of the four women sharing the mother’s double bed, hugging in peaceful symmetry. They are all asleep except Sara, who has her eyes open as a significant sign of awareness.

Barraza (2024), who addresses San Martín’s film from the perspective of female coming-of-age narratives – or *Bildungsfilm* – points out that

Rara’s opening scene is a starting point that invites us to reflect on the representation of the female adolescent’s gaze in correlation with the cinematographic interstice, ellipsis, and editing in contemporary Chilean cinema. While the audiovisual montage is the result of a series of ellipses [...] Sara’s transit through her school, registered on a long take, makes visible a continuity regarding the transition from female childhood to adulthood. (pp. 215–216)

Sara’s subjectivity is further accentuated in the next scene. As the opening title credits appear, a travelling shot follows a car driven by her mum’s partner, Lía (Agustina Muñoz). Sitting next to her is Sara, whose face is shown in the rear-view mirror; her arm, with colourful bracelets, is out the window and plays with the wind. She has just had her braces removed; it is a new beginning. This scene, together with the pre-credit long take, makes Sara the centre of the story while

establishing San Martín's main purpose: to provide a study of an all-female family through the subjectivation of a teenager.

The film takes us inside the intimate sphere of the house through a hand-held camera that instinctively introduces the other components of the family: Sara's younger sister Cata (Emilia Ossandón) and their mother Paula (Mariana Loyola). As the scene progresses, they all eat pizza in a series of natural shots that exhibit a strong emphasis on the complicity between Paula and Lía while they express affection and confidence in their ability as mothers. But this domestic bliss will soon be put into question. The film does not take long to raise part of the conflict that begins to threaten the stability of the household. This first turning point in the plot arises in a subsequent scene with a drawing by Cata of the all-female family. After her mother has received a call from the school, a mild argument that Sara overhears begins between Lía, Paula and her mother (Coca Guazzini), who blames the couple for being naïve to ignore the conservative Chilean institutions. "No es necesario poner a prueba a todo el mundo" [It is not necessary to test everyone], she says, thus implying that, as far as possible, they should conform to conventional social norms instead of transgressing certain limits. Although Paula's mother appears rather tolerant, she speaks for the Chilean patriarchal ideology. She is quite aware that her daughter's household is outside the moral order, and the familial castle they have built to sustain a non-normative family may be made of sand.

The school system is once again pictured as a coercive space when Sara's best friend (Micaela Cristi) tells her that the headmaster called out a couple of girls for kissing in public. Furthermore, Sara has to deal with prejudice and stigma when her best friend unfoundedly assumes she may have her mother's sexual preferences. Though this senseless assumption is possibly due to the lack of access to accurate information about homosexuality, Sara becomes aware of problems related to her mother's sexual orientation and how they may affect her own identity. Her friend's internalised homophobia, which extends to the whole education system, led her to the realisation that being a lesbian is negatively regarded. That is why she feels the need to make it clear to her friend that she likes men. As the plot unfolds, this heterosexual orientation awareness is reinforced through Sara's gazes and comments about a boy from school she likes. It is that very same boy the one she comes across at a dinner out with her family. Sara's crush is leaving the restaurant with his mother, and they greet Paula, who unceremoniously introduces her to Lía as her partner. While the boy's mother reacts in a way that exudes an air of disapproval, Sara, in a meaningfully balanced static shot, remains seated in the centre of the table with her back to the scene, but listening attentively. As both Lía and Paula return to the table, they laugh about the conservative reaction. Sara, quite the contrary, gazes at her two mums with a serious expression and anguished eyes.

#### 4. "No está bien porque a papá no le gusta"

Sara has been exposed to a relationship that consists of her mother living with her girlfriend, sharing the same bed, displaying affection in her presence, entertaining other lesbian women at home with music and drinks, and leaving the unwashed dishes for the next day. At first, when the conflict breaks out over the drawing of the two mums made by Cata, Sara decides to take on the role of her grandmother; thus, in an intimate bedroom scene between both sisters, she warns Cata about the danger that drawing both women together may pose. Significantly, Sara will take Cata's dissident family portrayal with her at the end of the film, when justice takes the father's side and both sisters must reluctantly abandon the maternal nest.

Sara also warns Cata about keeping secrets from her classmates that she has two mums, adding that "No está bien porque a papá no le gusta" [It's not right because Dad doesn't like it]. Trapped in a conflicting familial duality, Sara momentarily embraces the traditional model that the father figure provides, which reflects Chile's official attitudes towards sexuality and their "deep underlying conservatism" (Richards, 2020, p. 177). Thus, after a fight with her mother, in an attempt to get attention, she decides to throw her birthday party at her father's house, a domestic Elysium where everything is seemingly fine.

San Martín establishes the father (Daniel Muñoz) –a man in a suit and tie, with gelled back hair– as the guardian of normality. The iron bars surrounding his house are an image of the rigid morals that pervade the paternal realm, but, in the eyes of the law, these bars also foreshadow his legal status as father and Paula's punitive behaviour as a lesbian mother. He and his new wife Nicole (Sigrid Alegría), serve San Martín to subtly denounce the traditional familial structures ruled by patriarchal dynamics. Together, they make up a family portrait of shallowness and conventionality. Thus, when Sara begins to rebel against the adult world, her father does not hesitate to attribute her new personality to her ex-wife's environment and, more specifically, to her sexual orientation.

As mentioned before, Sara's diverging conduct is expressed through the subjective camera, which takes on her point of view multiple times. The film abounds with close-up shots of her character observing through different windows, both at school and home, as frames that separate Sara's internal experience from the external world. Likewise, the role of mirrors in the film reinforces her self-absorption while representing her fractured self.

Along with her sister, Sara inhabits a space of uncertainty that does not allow them to access that other territory where the adults speak, discuss and make decisions that affect them. Sara's weirdness, then, is that of a pre-pubescent girl transitioning to adolescence whose personal struggles with bodily appearance, first love and other issues turn her world into a strange place. Thus, once the bitter struggles over custody begin and the case is widely covered in the media, Sara confesses to her best friend that all she wants is "que todo vuelva a ser como



antes” [for everything to go back to the way it was before]. This longing not only implies her rejection of the changing process she is going through, but also that she does not want to take responsibility for the parental conflict.

Urrutia (2020) notes that Sara feels weird “not because her mother is a lesbian but because she herself is entering puberty. Her body is changing, and her desires and her vision are changing along with it” (pp. 146–147). The process of growth and transformation Sara is undergoing is unquestionable: she manipulates situations in her favour, runs away one night to see the boy she likes, steals some cigarettes from her mother, and feels that no one but her best friend understands her. Maguire and Randall (2018), in their approach to contemporary adolescent-focused films in Latin America, argue that, “as opposed to child protagonists, teens are often characterized by rebelliousness, a loss of innocence, experimentation, sexual-awakening and highly self-conscious behaviors” (p. 11). However, in our view, limiting Sara’s conflict to her pubescent transition understates her own awareness of being different to the “norm” because of living with her mother and her partner. The character’s weirdness also arises when her surroundings put into question the “normality” of her family situation. The domestic dynamics are shattered as she becomes tacitly aware that, for some people, her mother’s behaviour is considered immoral.

On the other hand, although the film does not make a judgement about the characters’ actions, San Martín challenges the heterosexual, patriarchal, nuclear family model embodied by the father. In an attempt to respond to this condition of weirdness experienced by Sara, the director presents the paternal home as an antagonistic setting governed by a bourgeois and corseted order. Therefore, the film’s multifaceted title also alludes to the family formed by Sara’s father and his new wife, as well as to the strangeness both sisters feel when it is the legal framework that determines where they should live.

## 5. Closing remarks

*Rara* is a film about free women who are unprotected by the law. The abrupt ending, as it cuts to a black screen, is the manifestation of a dark legal system that needs to be questioned. Along with a number of other films, *Rara* responds “to social, political and cultural shifts in many countries of the world, redefinitions of the family unit, and an increase in social rights for gays, lesbians and transgender people (Shaw, 2013, p. 178). This explains the positive impact on human rights that San Martín’s feature-length film debut has had in Chile and some other countries. To raise awareness about sexual diversity, equality, and integration, *Rara* has been included in sexual psychology textbooks like Arias Paris’s *Ni medio heterosexual, ni medio sexual. Soy bisexual* [Neither Half Heterosexual nor Half Sexual. I Am Bisexual] (2020), and it has been used in educational worksheets such as the one developed by the Cineteca Nacional de Chile’s Film School Program (Programa



Escuela al Cine) and the Audience Training for Children Program (Programa Educación y Cine) at the Cine Arte Normandie (Chile). Likewise, the film is part of several educational campaigns on respect for sexual diversity and same-sex parents, like the one developed by the Spanish Education League (2019).

*Rara* has also paved the way for audiences to embrace an unprejudiced model of the family unit on either side of the screen. Not without reason, the film's commercial premiere in Chile achieved the rating of suitable for family audiences, becoming the first production with lesbian protagonists to obtain this rating in the country (Zinegoak, 2020, p. 8). As San Martín states, the film attempts to be “a reflection of the society that we're building and where we want to take it” (San Martín, 2017). Sara, in the end, epitomises hope, even though the struggle for non-normative family constructions goes on.

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